Boldly Approach the Delta's Future

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Policy decisions on how to manage the lands and waters of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta are unavoidably controversial. The Delta Stewardship Council's first Delta Plan, now under development, presents a rare opportunity to establish bold state policy directions on the Delta's many controversies. Such bold action is needed to effectively address major water supply reliability, ecosystem enhancement, and flood challenges within the Delta. Without clear direction now, sea level rise, continued sinking of Delta lands, larger floods, earthquakes, state and federal budget crises, and expanding problems with endangered species will make solutions increasingly difficult.

Bold state policy directions are needed to settle several controversial issues, described below. Those familiar with our work will recognize that we have drawn conclusions on many of these issues in the past (Lund et al. 2010, Hanak et al. 2011). In calling for bold action, we are not advocating for these positions, but rather for clear statements of policy direction, to help move California forward:

1) **Levees.** About 40 islands in the western and central Delta – covering more than 350,000 acres - lie many feet below sea level, protected from flooding by fragile levees. Will state policy be to rescue every single island and fund maintenance or upgrading of all 1,100 miles of Delta levees? If not, how will the state allocate limited funds among Delta islands? Will levee decisions be planned in advance, or occur on an ad hoc basis when an island floods? Should a transition policy support shifts of less sustainable islands to aquatic habitat and recreation?

2) **Long-term water exports**. Water exports from the south Delta pumps currently account for about 15 percent of all urban and agricultural uses in California. Reducing these diversions could aid environmental management of the system, but eliminating exports altogether seems economically unwise. How will water diversions occur in the future? Should pumping continue in the south Delta where it harms native fish? Or should some form of peripheral canal or tunnel - even a small one - tap water further upstream to lessen these environmental risks?

3) **Native fish species**. Populations of many native fish species that live in the Delta are already severely weakened, and their conditions are likely to become even more precarious with climate change and new invasive species. Realistically, is it really possible to save all native Delta fish species from extinction in the wild? Society is not ready to answer this question, but discussions about the Delta's long-term future would benefit from recognizing that there is a likelihood that the answer is "no."

4) **State policies outside of the Delta**: Upstream water use, water conservation, water marketing, habitat restoration, floodplain restoration, hatchery policies, salmon access above some dams, and other actions outside the Delta itself will also affect successes and failures within the Delta. The state needs effective policies outside the Delta to support economic and environmental goals for the Delta.

5) **Stronger scientific leadership**: Lack of scientific and technical clarity has hindered productive public policy discussions of the Delta. How can scientific and technical work be better organized to provide useful insights for management and policy discussions?

6) **Finance:** Policies without funding and authority are meaningless. Where will money come from for managing the Delta?

Each of these topics involves a difficult conversation. No wonder Delta policy discussions are often deeply in denial.

The Delta Stewardship Council is politically independent and has the legal authority to coordinate the cacophony of other Delta plans. The current draft plan (fifth of seven) shows boldness in some areas, but not others. It clearly states that the most direct way to improve water supply reliability is to ask for less water from the Delta, and it calls for more regional water self-reliance. The plan notes that the deep subsidence of Delta lands will prevent most of the region from ever returning to the natural habitat of yore – a vast tidal marsh – but also that the Delta cannot be kept in its current condition. Financially, the plan also soberly calls for a set of user fees for those who benefit from Delta services as well as fees for those whose past and present actions have led to the Delta's decline. But the other issues enumerated above require similar attention and boldness.

On rare occasions in water policy, bold statements can establish facts, dispel delusions, and change the direction of policy dialogues, cutting off less promising directions and moving the more promising ones forward. This first official Delta Stewardship Council plan presents such an occasion.

Bold action on controversies of the Delta will meet resistance. But by setting bold, realistic policies, the DSC can move California beyond intransigent positions and unsustainable management of the Delta.

The status quo, no matter how unsustainable, is a strong attractor. Failure to firmly break with the deteriorating status quo is the greatest threat to achieving positive environmental and economic goals for the Delta.

References:

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